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STATE FOR NEA/FO (WELCH AND GRAY), NEA/PI, AND NEA/MAG
(HARRIS AND HOPKINS)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/23/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN FM ADMITS MORE FREEDOM NEEDED

REF: STATE 88465

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) Foreign Minister Abdallah used a July 24 meeting with the Ambassador on other topics to express his concern about Post's engagement of independent opposition figures. Ambassador reminded Abdallah of the USG's commitment to the Freedom Agenda and encouraged greater political reform. In a first, Abdallah admitted that there are problems with human rights and democracy in Tunisia. Further, he said there is a divide within the GOT about the speed of reform. End Summary.

EMBASSY ACTIVITIES DISTURBING

¶2. (S) During a July 24 meeting requested by the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah expressed his concerns about Embassy efforts to engage political opposition. In an apparent reference to Post's monthly Human Rights and Democracy roundtable series and to the Ambassador's meetings with opposition and civil society leaders, Abdallah noted "repeated meetings" with members of "illegal," "Islamist," and "extremist" opposition activists. Abdallah told the Ambassador that he had learned that, "Inside the US embassy, Tunisia is the subject of virulent criticism by Tunisians." While criticism is okay, Abdallah said, these individuals are spreading lies and false information. Abdallah added that he is "shocked" by Tunisians who insult their country in front of foreign governments. He took particular umbrage with the fact that some had alleged that Tunisia had regressed since President Ben Ali came to power in 1987.

FREEDOM AGENDA FOREMOST

¶3. (S) Abdallah asked the Ambassador if "something had changed" since his June visit to Washington. As reftel instructed, the Ambassador highlighted President Bush's Prague speech on freedom and said that the embassy has an obligation to meet with opposition groups. The Ambassador said Tunisia has an opportunity to make greater political progress and that the GOT should listen to the views of all Tunisians, including those in the opposition, as the Ambassador himself is doing. Abdallah said that it is good the Ambassador is meeting with many Tunisians to learn more about the country, but added that the truth must be contrasted with "gratuitous accusations."

POLITICAL "PROBLEMS"

14. (S) Abdallah said that Tunisia is advancing, but agreed that "there are some small problems with human rights and freedom." However, Abdallah noted that not everyone in the GOT agrees about the pace of political reform. He told the Ambassador that, "Some are open, others are conservative." Abdallah agreed that communication between all Tunisians is important and thanked the Ambassador for the "frank and transparent spirit" that currently exists between the USG and GOT.

COMMENT

15. (S) This conversation represents the most frank exchange with the Foreign Minister on the freedom deficit in Tunisia since his appointment in August 2005. Although he has in the past been surly when discussing political opposition, in this case Abdallah seemed truly aware of the negative impact GOT policies have on Tunisia's foreign and domestic agenda. His views on the GOT's internal divide on the pace of reform match those shared by a limited number of other senior officials. They also are indicative of a political "schizophrenia" that many civil society activists believe is responsible for the GOT's uneven approach to the opposition. End Comment.

16. (S) Bio Note: For the second time in recent meetings, Abdallah waxed eloquent at the conclusion of the meeting about his admiration for the United States. He discussed several of the states and cities he has visited, including Boston, Los Angeles and San Francisco, and underscored his affinity for US culture.
GODEC